

**STANISLAUS COUNTY FIRE AND LIFE SAVING SERVICES  
CIVIL GRAND JURY CASE #07-34  
2006-2007**

**SUMMARY**

The 2006-2007 Stanislaus County Civil Grand Jury authorized a review and assessment of the fire and life saving services which are provided to the citizens of Stanislaus County.

Through interviews and document review, the Civil Grand Jury determined that the current fire service delivery system is inefficient and inadequate to meet the needs of a growing county population. The Civil Grand Jury believes that strong leadership from the County Board of Supervisors, in coordination with the various fire districts and the Stanislaus County Fire Chiefs Association, is needed to increase the effectiveness of this important public service.

**BACKGROUND**

Fire and life saving services in Stanislaus County are provided by 18 separate and autonomous fire safety organizations. Each organization has its own governance and financial base.

There are six municipal fire departments. They include: Ceres; Modesto; Newman; Oakdale; Patterson; and Turlock. Municipal fire departments are funded through general fund revenues.

In addition, there are fourteen special districts in Stanislaus County. They include: Burbank-Paradise Fire Protection District; Ceres Fire Protection District; Denair Fire Protection District; Hughson Fire Protection District; Industrial Fire Protection District; Keyes Fire Protection District; Mountain View Fire Protection District; Oakdale Rural Fire Protection District; Salida Fire Protection District; Stanislaus Consolidated Fire Protection District; Turlock Rural Fire Protection District; Westport Fire Protection District; West Stanislaus Fire Protection District; and Woodland Fire Protection District. It should be noted that two of these districts (Industrial Fire Protection District and Ceres Fire Protection District) have their fire service provided entirely by another contracted service provider. Special Districts are funded from their own tax base.

**METHODS OF INVESTIGATION**

The Civil Grand Jury interviewed a majority of the 18 fire chiefs, from the largest to the smallest organization, and reviewed "White Paper Stanislaus County Fire Chiefs Association Strategic Visioning Meeting Summary Report July 30, 2004" and also the March 2007 Stanislaus LAFCO Countywide Fire Services Municipal Service Review Final Report.

## FINDINGS

Based on the interviews and document review the Civil Grand Jury found that among the 18 fire districts:

1. There is variation in the quality of training provided to staff.
2. There are varying response times and professional capabilities. Minimal standards cannot always be met.
3. Increasing population, new technology, legal mandates, rising equipment costs and unnecessary administrative staff duplication add to the financial burden.
4. New disaster planning requirements have expanded responsibilities and liabilities requiring closer coordination in the areas of planning and performance.
5. City expansion by annexation has markedly weakened the financial base of some rural fire districts making it increasingly difficult for these districts to meet their responsibilities.
6. State training mandates have made recruitment and retention of voluntary firefighters more difficult. Costly full time staff must be used to fill the formerly volunteer positions.
7. The merger of several smaller districts into fewer but larger areas would offer several benefits. Among them:
  - **Lower administrative costs.** The merger of many boards would lower total salary costs of both administrative and professional staff.
  - **More efficient deployment of expensive equipment.** Some pieces of equipment would become unnecessary.
  - **More efficient location of fire stations.** Given larger areas to protect, stations could be more efficiently placed.
  - **Standardized recruitment and training of personnel.** All staff would be held to the same standards of training and competence.
  - **Better use of specialized staff.** Specialists in such areas as hazardous materials and fire investigation could be more efficiently deployed.
8. There is need for an unbiased outside facilitator/mediator to work with all districts to change the current delivery system.

9. No government body has fully accepted the overall responsibility of addressing the need for change in fire and life saving services available to the citizens of Stanislaus County.
10. The Civil Grand Jury believes that any consolidation should occur only after full consideration of financial impact, proper planning and consultation/involvement from all concerned parties including the public.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Civil Grand Jury is fully aware that the provision of fire and life saving services is a complicated process and that no Civil Grand Jury member has the expertise to second guess the professionals who provide these essential services. The Civil Grand Jury has no desire to recommend specific changes beyond its expertise. However, a majority of Civil Grand Jury members believes that the present delivery system is inadequate and unable to fully meet the present and future needs of the citizens of Stanislaus County.

The Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

1. The County Board of Supervisors assume the leadership role of solving the multiple problems in fire and life saving services.
2. The County Board of Supervisors work with the Stanislaus County Fire Chiefs Association and various district boards to achieve appropriate consolidation of present districts consistent with the most effective and efficient use of manpower and resources.
3. The County Board of Supervisors share equally the cost of outside expert consultation and/or mediation with the various districts.

**RESPONSE REQUIRED** *per Section 933(c) and 933.05 of the California Penal Code*

Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors